

“WHAT IF IT WERE US?” TACKLING FORCED DISPLACEMENT TRENDS: SLOVENIA AND REFUGEE ADMISSIONS

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Case study





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Introduction

“Nearly 1 person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution,” according to the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data on forced displacement.¹ This case study reviews Slovenia’s experience in refugee admissions as a response to growing forced displacement trends.

Europe, forced migration flows and durable solutions

While Europe registered more than a million arrivals in 2015, the number of arrivals has been falling since 2016. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) data,² in 2019 123,920 arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers has been registered (2018: 144,282 people; in 2017: 186,788; in 2016: 390,456). The number of asylum claims in the EU has reached a peak in 2015 with 1,321,600 asylum claims, with the number of asylum applications significantly decreasing in the next years (2016: 1,259,955 asylum claims; 2017: 705,705; and 2018: 646,060 asylum claims).³ There have been 2,476,361 registered refugees in the EU in 2018.

UNHCR has been recording a growing trend in forced displacement; in 2018, the global population of forcibly displaced increased by 2.3 million people, with almost 70.8 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide (a record high) by the end of the year due to persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.⁴

Depending on circumstances of refugees, there are various options of so-called durable solutions “that allow /refugees/ to rebuilding their lives”:⁵ voluntary repatriation, resettlement in another country or integration within the host community. “Resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement.”⁶ UNHCR is mandated for the resettlement, and countries decide to take part in the programme. “In recent years, the United States has been the world’s top resettlement country, with Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia and the Nordic countries also providing a sizeable number of places annually.”⁷ Resettlement States provide the refugee with legal and physical protection, including access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals.

By 2018, resettlement had been embedded as a policy priority at the EU level following several stand-alone joint resettlement programmes, with EU funding available for resettling Member States through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). In 2015, as recent and protracted conflicts and crises around the globe caused record-high num-

1 Source: UNHCR, Figures at a Glance; accessible at: <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

2 Source: InfoMigrants, Migration to Europe in 2019; available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/21811/migration-to-europe-in-2019-facts-and-figures>.

3 Source: European Union, Asylum Applications, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/infographic/welcoming-europe/index_en.html#filter=2018.

4 Source: UNHCR, Global trends – Forced displacement in 2018; available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>.

5 Source: UNHCR, Solutions; available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/solutions.html>.

6 Source: UNHCR, Resettlement; available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement.html>.

7 Ibid.

bers of asylum-seekers and migrants to cross into Europe, the European Commission presented the European Agenda on Migration, a guiding document pointing out short- and long-term measures to collectively respond to the numerous challenges EU Member States faced. Among the immediate actions to be taken, the Agenda highlighted the proposal for an emergency temporary mechanism to distribute within the EU persons in need of international protection who claim asylum on EU territory and belong to certain nationalities (relocation), and the establishment of an EU-wide resettlement scheme for refugees with specific needs and vulnerabilities to arrive from third countries.⁸

EU resettlement scheme was launched in July 2015 following the EU leaders' agreement the previous month to resettle 22.504 refugees in two years. Over 24 000 people have been resettled as of March 2019. The resettlement scheme for Syrian refugees in Turkey was set up following the EU-Turkey agreement of March 2016. Close to 21.000 Syrians have been resettled so far through this scheme as of March 2019. In September 2017 the Commission adopted a recommendation calling on member states to offer resettlement places for 50 000 people, to be admitted by 31 October 2019.⁹ But "EU has delivered only three-quarters of a two-year program due to be completed by the end of October /2019/."¹⁰

Slovenia and refugee resettlement

In response to the increased number of refugees and migrants coming to Europe between 2015 and 2016 (the so-called refugee crisis), Slovenia has committed to relocating 218 persons from Italy and 349 persons from Greece, and to resettle 20 persons from third countries under the EU scheme for relocation and resettlement of international protection applicants and refugees.¹¹ On 4 August 2016, the Government adopted a decision that, based on the EU-Turkey Agreement, 60 third-country nationals in total who are eligible for refugee status may be admitted.¹² In March 2016, the Government of Slovenia established an interdepartmental working group to coordinate the implementation plan, which includes representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Public Administration, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.¹³

In 2017, the Ministry of the Interior appointed a task force for the implementation of the permanent resettlement process, comprised of internal experts on migration and international protection. During preparations for the implementation of permanent resettlement, the Republic of Slovenia also accepted EASO support and joined the EU FRANK project.¹⁴

UNHCR representation in Ankara referred in 67 persons and 13 families for permanent resettlement to Slovenia by the end of 2017.¹⁵ The framework agreement between the Republic of Slovenia and IOM has been signed in 2018. In 2018, the Ministry of the Interior organized a selection mission of 10 civil servants (representatives of the Office of Migration/Ministry of the Interior, the Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants and the Police). In Ankara (Turkey), interviews have been conducted with members of 13 families, altogether 57 persons, who were referred as eligible candidates for permanent resettlement by the UNHCR upon the invitation of the Republic of Slovenia. On the

8 Source: The European Resettlement Network, Resettlement in Europe; available at: <https://www.resettlement.eu/page/resettlement-in-europe>.

9 Source: European Council, How the EU manages migration flows; available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/migratory-pressures/managing-migration-flows/>.

10 Source: DW, EU breaks promise of safe passage for 50,000 refugees; available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-breaks-promise-of-safe-passage-for-50000-refugees/a-50803664>.

11 Source: Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve (2016): Poročilo z delovnega področja migracij, mednarodne zaščite in vključevanja za leto 2015. Accessible at: http://mnz.arhiv-spletisc.gov.si/fileadmin/mnz.gov.si/pageuploads/DUNZMN_2013/DUNZMN_2014/DUNZMN_2015/DUNZMN_2016/Statisticno_porocilo_-_SLO_2015_25052016.pdf.

12 Source: Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve (2017): Poročilo z delovnega področja migracij, mednarodne zaščite in vključevanja za leto 2016. Accessible at: http://mnz.arhiv-spletisc.gov.si/fileadmin/mnz.gov.si/pageuploads/DUNZMN_2013/DUNZMN_2014/DUNZMN_2015/DUNZMN_2016/DUNZMN_2017/Statisticno_porocilo_-_SLOVENSKO_2016.pdf.

13 Ibid.

14 Source: Annual Report of the Migration Office for 2017, available at: http://www.mnz.gov.si/fileadmin/mnz.gov.si/pageuploads/DUNZMN_2013/DUNZMN_2014/DUNZMN_2015/DUNZMN_2016/DUNZMN_2017/DUNZMN_2018/Porocilo_2017_SLO_1652018.pdf.

15 Ibid.

basis of received documentation and interviews, it was established that 40 people meet the conditions for granting the international protection status.¹⁶

Arrival to Slovenia took place in close cooperation with the Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants, whose staff provided a few days' pre-departure orientation course, and provided accommodation and enrolment of the resettled refugees in existing programs upon arrival in Slovenia. The process was carried out with the organizational support of IOM, which signed a framework agreement for the implementation of the procedure.¹⁷

In total, 34 Syrian citizens were permanently resettled to Slovenia and 253 people were relocated during the project period, representing 44,6% of Slovenia's commitment. From Italy, 81 people were relocated, of whom 77 Eritrean citizens, three Syrian citizens and one Yemeni citizen. From Greece, 172 persons were relocated, of whom 149 Syrian citizens, Iraqi citizens and six stateless persons. Altogether, 234 decisions have been issued on the recognition of refugee status to relocated asylum-seekers, 11 decisions on the recognition of subsidiary protection status, five decisions rejecting the asylum claim, and three decisions to stop the procedure were issued during the duration of the project. In one case, the decision to withdraw the refugee status was issued.¹⁸ With finalization of the relocation implementation, the inter-ministerial working group has submitted its final report to the Government in August 2018, and has subsequently ceased with its activities.¹⁹

For refugees relocated and resettled to Slovenia, an orientation program has been developed. The goal of the project has been to enable the beneficiaries to acquire the basics of the Slovene language and to learn about the way of life, culture and state regulation. The orientation program provided beneficiaries the basis and preparation for later independent living and participation in the program of learning the Slovene language. Each beneficiary has been enrolled in the program for a maximum of three months after obtaining the international protection status, up to five hours of activities a day. The project activities have been implemented in larger or smaller groups or individually, encompassing the motivation of users to participate in the program, literacy program of people who are illiterate or poorly literate in Latin alphabet, learning the basics of the Slovenian language, based on practical experience and simulation of conversation in different situations, assistance in accommodation and introduction to independent living in the integration house (i.e. accommodation facility managed by the Government Office for Support and Integration of Migrants), practical presentation of the operation of various systems, visits to the various institutions and getting acquainted with them. During the project implementation, special attention has been paid to children and other vulnerable groups. The project has been implemented by a Slovenian NGO, Slovene Philanthropy, selected in the public tender.²⁰

Conclusion

Whilst Slovenia's experience in refugee admissions is very limited, with participation in the refugee resettlement and asylum-seekers relocation scheme, Slovenia has taken initial steps in responding to the growing trends in forced displacement. Slovenian Government committed in the Migration Strategy to promote legal and safe pathways of persons in need of protection, including through resettlement. In line with forced displacement trends, it should expand the refugee admissions (and thus strive to prevent the death toll resulting from people undertaking perilous journeys to escape unworthy living conditions), to ensure full implementation of the 2030 Agenda principle of "leaving no one behind" and of the target 10.7 to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. By increasing the refugee admissions through the resettlement programme, the Slovenia would reiterate its commitment to promoting universal human rights and achieving sustainable development for all. Because: "What if it were us?"

16 Source: Annual Report of the Migration Office for 2018, available at: http://www.mnz.gov.si/fileadmin/mnz.gov.si/pageuploads/DUNZMN_2013/DUNZMN_2014/DUNZMN_2015/DUNZMN_2016/DUNZMN_2017/DUNZMN_2018/Porocilo_2018_SLO.pdf.

17 Ibid.

18 Source: Ministry of Interior; available at: http://www.mnz.gov.si/si/novinarsko_sredisce/novica/10375/.

19 Source: Annual Report of the Migration Office for 2017, available at: http://www.mnz.gov.si/fileadmin/mnz.gov.si/pageuploads/DUNZMN_2013/DUNZMN_2014/DUNZMN_2015/DUNZMN_2016/DUNZMN_2017/DUNZMN_2018/Porocilo_2017_SLO_1652018.pdf.

20 Source: Annual Report of the Migration Office for 2017, available at: http://www.mnz.gov.si/fileadmin/mnz.gov.si/pageuploads/DUNZMN_2013/DUNZMN_2014/DUNZMN_2015/DUNZMN_2016/DUNZMN_2017/DUNZMN_2018/Porocilo_2017_SLO_1652018.pdf.

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